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ABSTRACT

A study supplementing earlier research by Lalande and Schweckendiek investigated comparisons and correlations obtained from testing a group of 17 university students of German using both the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) and the most recent revision of the examination for the Zertifikat Deutsch als Fremdsprache (ZDaF). The OPI is a direct test of speaking proficiency, while the ZDaF combines direct, function-oriented, oral and written tests with discrete, multiple-choice tests of reading, listening, and grammar/vocabulary skills. The most important result of the study was that the data revealed a very strong correlation between OPI and ZDaF. Evidence also indicated a strong correlation between the OPI and the composite of the oral portions of the ZDaF, and between the OPI and the composite of the written portions of the ZDaF. The results also mirrored earlier findings of a high correlation between the OPI and the ZDaF grammar/vocabulary development sections. The advantages and disadvantages of administering each test are presented so that test administrators can make the best informed choices. (DJD)

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Another Look at Correlations between the Oral Proficiency Interview and the Zertifikat Deutsch als Fremdsprache (Johannes Vazulik, North Dakota State University, ND, and Cheri Brown, Moorhead State University, MN)

Introduction

In recent years language teaching professionals have focused increasing attention on the notion of proficiency; that is, we have become more and more concerned with how well our students actually are able to perform certain tasks using the target language--tasks usually defined in terms of the macroskills reading, writing, listening, and speaking. We want our students to be able to use the target language "for some pragmatically useful purpose within a real-life setting."[1] In addition to the achievement testing we usually employ for determining and distributing course grades, we also need to be able to measure the development of language skills in terms of overall proficiency. Only such information will allow us to evaluate and continue to improve our teaching and testing strategies so that our students progress toward the proficiency we wish them to attain. While the goals of defining and testing "proficiency" offer continuing challenges and demand further, extensive research, we present here, supplementing the earlier study by Lalande and Schweckendiek, comparisons and correlations obtained from testing a group of seventeen university students using both the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview and the most recent revision of the examination for the Zertifikat Deutsch als Fremdsprache.[2]

The OPI and the ZDaF are, of course, dissimilar in many respects. The OPI is a direct test of speaking proficiency, giving a "global" rating on a

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developmental scale; while the ZDaF combines direct, function-oriented oral and writing tests with discrete, multiple-choice testing of reading, listening, and grammar/vocabulary. The ZDaF measures proficiency in terms of basic vocabulary items and functional/notional tasks established by the test writers as necessary "to deal with all communicative situations abroad."[3] Nevertheless, these two examinations currently represent the most widely accepted options for proficiency testing for students and teachers of German. We hope this study and our comments and interpretation of the test results will encourage adoption of such proficiency testing on an even broader scale; and, since normally students will take one test or the other but not both, we will offer specific recommendations regarding the choice and administration of each examination.

Descriptions of Tests

Zertifikat Deutsch als Fremdsprache

The ZDaF was cooperatively developed over the last twenty years by the Deutscher Volkshochschulverband (DVV) and the Goethe Institute. The second and latest revision of the examination was completed in 1985. The test enables examinees to demonstrate that they have achieved sufficient linguistic competence to function adequately in the normal, everyday-life situations that would be encountered in a typical German city. Working committees, drawing on text books used in educating adult learners of German and to a limited extent on word-frequency lists, devised a 2,000 word vocabulary and catalogue of syntactical structures directly related to everyday situations as the basis for the test. The listening, reading, and structure/vocabulary sections of the test are composed of multiple-choice items. Written expression is tested

by asking the examinees to write a short letter, following specific directions; while the oral interview consists of two parts: communication in everyday situations, where the examinee responds to specific problems as posed by the tester, and a guided conversation, again directed by the examiner, but probing one topic at greater length. Points are awarded by the testers after the oral examination for pronunciation as well as for overall communicative competence. The written test (including a pause) lasts approximately three hours; the oral interview, which follows on the next day, takes 15-20 minutes per individual test. Administration and correction of all parts of the test are by two examiners, both of whom must have been trained by the Goethe Institute. The test fee is $15.00[4]

The 1985 ZDaF differs from earlier versions in several respects:

--students must now earn at least 54 points in the written portions of the test and at least 18 points in the oral portion of the test in order to pass.

--in the oral test, the section "Gelenktes Gespräch" has been extended and the examinee is expected to summarize a short passage given by the examiner as well as to pose questions to the examiner. The situations presented for "Kommunikation in Alltagssituationen" have been made more challenging, since the student must perform two linguistic tasks in response to each situation.[5] The overall rating for communicative competence (3 pts) has been added.

Oral Proficiency Interview

The ACTFL/ETS Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) is a one-to-one conversation designed to measure an individual's functional language

competence. The interview procedure lasts between ten and twenty-five minutes, depending on the performance level of the person being tested. Levels range from Novice to Superior. Properly administered, the OPI has the appearance of a casual exchange, while being, in fact, a highly structured dialogue intended to yield a ratable sample of an individual's oral FL skills. The interview, which is taped for verification of the assessed proficiency level by the tester and a second rater, is conducted in four phases:

Phase 1: Warm-up. This phase is relatively brief, generally lasting less than three minutes, and consists of the exchange of social amenities between the tester and person being tested. Like the other phases, the warm-up serves a threefold purpose: On a psychological plane, it allows the individual to begin thinking in the target language and sets him at ease; on the linguistic plane, it reaccustoms the student to hearing and using the language, while, on the evaluative plane, giving the tester a preliminary indication of the individual's listening and speaking skills which determines at what level the next phase of the interview will be aimed.

Phase 2: Level Check. The objective of this portion of the interview is to establish the highest level of proficiency at which the student can sustain speaking performance; that is, the level at which the interviewee can, with the greatest degree of accuracy, perform the functions and speak about the content areas designated by the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. If the proficiency level estimated by the interviewer during the warm-up proves incorrect, the tester can adjust the interview upward or downward accordingly. This is the phase in which the tester collects evidence of the actual proficiency level of the person being interviewed.

Phase 3: Probes. These are questions or tasks designed to elicit

language samples at one level of proficiency higher than the hypothesized level in order to ascertain a ceiling of the interviewee's performance. Probes are intended to lead to linguistic breakdown--the point at which the individual is unable to function linguistically because the task is too difficult. Probes are used several times during the interview to establish an accurate rating.

Phase 4: Wind-up. Once a ratable speech sample has been obtained, the tester returns during the last few minutes of the exchange to the level at which the person being interviewed functions most comfortably and accurately. This permits the individual to conclude the assessment feeling successful and positive about the interview. This last phase gives the tester one more opportunity to verify the proficiency rating.[5]

Methodology of Study

The ZDaf was administered by a faculty member of Concordia College and the coauthor from Moorhead State University, both certified as testers by the Goethe Institute. Students were from three area universities: Moorhead State University, North Dakota State University, and the University of North Dakota. They were of varying background in terms of both formal and informal language learning experience. Three of the seventeen (students 1-3-4) had spent six months to one year in a German-speaking environment with concurrent formal instruction in the language; one student (2) had learned a dialect of German while growing up in Denmark; one student (8), who was fluent in Dutch, had only one year of formal instruction in German but had traveled extensively in Germany during the year she studied in Holland. The remaining thirteen had studied German in the U.S. from two to five years, including instruction on

the secondary level. While Lalande and Schweckendiek tested students on a voluntary basis, in this group only three students (1-2-3) were volunteers. Fourteen of the students in the test group were required to take the proficiency tests to complete course work.

Instructors had been provided with an Übungssatz of the ZDaF to familiarize students with the format of the exam, which includes one oral interview. Students were told that they would be taking an additional oral interview (the OPI) with another tester but were given no other information about the OPI. All students took both the ZDaF and the OPI within one week; students 1-2-3 had the OPI after the ZDaf, while for the remaining students the OPI preceded the ZDaF. Students were informed that the scores obtained on both tests would be considered as part of their final grade in their respective language courses. The OPI interviews were recorded and then rated by each investigator independently.[7] As is the practice with official ACTFL OPIs, where ratings differed, the lower rating given within a proficiency level was allowed to stand.

Since the majority of ratings assigned were in the Intermediate range, a description of characteristics associated with that range is in order.

The Intermediate level is characterized by the speaker's ability to:

--create with the language by combining and recombining learned elements, though primarily in a reactive mode;

--initiate, minimally sustain, and close in a simple way basic communicative tasks; and

--ask and answer questions.

The Intermediate level is subdivided into three categories, i.e., Low, Mid, and High, which are differentiated by varying abilities to handle

uncomplicated communicative tasks and social situations. Provided sufficient contexts have been evoked during the interview, the factors used to discriminate between Intermediate Low and Intermediate Mid ratings are the quality and quantity of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. If two of those three factors are rated plus on a + / 0 / - rating scale, the rating will be an Intermediate Mid. The chief characteristic distinguishing an Intermediate High from an Intermediate Mid rating is emerging evidence of connected discourse. Also, to be rated Intermediate High, candidates must sustain performance sixty percent of the time at the next higher level (Advanced). The speaker who peaks into the Advanced level but does not meet the sixty-percent criterion is rated Intermediate Mid.[6]

The Advanced level is characterized by the speaker's ability to:

-- converse in a clearly participatory way;

-- initiate, sustain, and close a wide variety of communicative tasks and use diverse language strategies to convey meaning when complications arise;

-- satisfy the requirements of school and work situations;

-- narrate and describe with paragraph-length connected discourse.

To qualify for the Advanced rating the discourse must be sustained at the paragraph level in both past and future tenses.

The OPI also recognizes higher and lower levels of proficiency with Superior and Novice ratings, but none of the students in this study were assessed to be at those levels.

Results and Significant Correlations

Table 1 below contains the scores of interest to the investigation of

possible correlations between the ZDaF and the OPI. The ZDaF scores are ranked from highest to lowest. The students' corresponding OPI ratings are listed next to the ZDaF scores but are not rank-ordered.

Table 1 -- Student-by-student OPI and ZDaF Scores

Student Number	OPI Rating	ZDaF Rating	Total	Read	List	Writ	Vocab	Comp Writing	Situ	Them Conv	Comm	Pron	Comp Speak
1	Adv	sehr gut	112.0	28	27	15	14.0	84.0	6.5	17.0	3.0	1.5	28.0
2	Adv	sehr gut	111.5	28	27	15	13.0	83.0	7.0	17.5	3.0	1.0	28.5
3	Adv-P	sehr gut	110.25	26	27	15	12.25	80.25	7.5	18.0	3.0	1.5	30.0
4	Adv	sehr gut	109.5	30	25	12	13.5	80.5	7.0	17.5	3.0	1.5	29.0
5	Int-H	gut	99.5	28	24	10	11.0	73.0	4.5	17.5	3.0	1.5	26.5
6	Int-H	gut	97.5	22	25	12	9.5	68.5	7.0	17.5	3.0	1.5	29.0
7	Int-M	befried.	89.25	20	22	12	9.75	63.75	6.0	16.0	2.0	1.5	25.5
8	Int-M	befried.	87.25	22	22	7	7.75	58.75	7.0	17.0	3.0	1.5	28.5
9	Int-M	ausreich.	82.0	18	24	10	10.0	62.0	3.5	13.5	2.0	1.0	20.0
10	Int-M	ausreich.	81.0	16	24	7	8.0	55.0	6.0	15.5	3.0	1.5	26.0
11	Int-H	ausreich.	79.75	14	24	10	7.25	55.25	6.5	15.0	2.0	1.0	24.5
12	Int-L	nicht bestanden	78.25	20	24	10	7.75	61.75	4.5	10.0	1.0	1.0	16.5
13	Int-M	ausreich.	74.5	16	23	10	7.0	56.0	4.0	12.0	1.0	1.0	18.0
14	Int-L	nicht bestanden	74.25	20	22	10	5.75	57.75	5.0	9.5	1.0	1.0	16.5
15	Int-M	nicht bestanden	72.75	16	19	10	6.75	51.75	4.5	14.5	1.0	1.0	20.0
16	Int-M	nicht bestanden	65.5	14	21	0	7.5	42.5	5.5	14.5	2.0	1.0	23.0
17	Int-L	nicht bestanden	59.5	12	21	8	5.5	46.5	4.0	7.5	1.0	0.5	13.0

Table 2 below presents a matrix of correlation coefficients. These coefficients were computed using the Spearman Rank-Order formula.[9]

Table 2 -- Matrix of Correlation Coefficients

	OPI	ZDaF	Read	List	Writ	Grmr/ Vocab	Composite Writing	Them Situ	Conv	Comm	Composite Pron	Speaking
OPI	---	.83**	.65**	.78**	.69**	.78**	.71**	.70**	.88**	.77**	.55*	.86**
ZDaF	---	---	.88**	.86**	.76**	.93**	.94**	.66**	.86**	.83**	.72**	.84**
Read	---	---	---	.70**	.69**	.82**	.93**	.56*	.75**	.69**	.65**	.72**
List	---	---	---	---	.73**	.81**	.83**	.57*	.67**	.69**	.46	.68**
Writ	---	---	---	---	---	.67**	.85**	.48	.58*	.36	.34	.52*
Gr/Voc	---	---	---	---	---	---	.89**	.52*	.79**	.80**	.66**	.76**
C/Writ	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	.52*	.71**	.64**	.57*	.67**
Situ	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	.79**	.74**	.61**	.87**
Conv	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	.90**	.78**	.97**
Comm	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	.79**	.92**
Pron	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	.79**

* $p < .05$ with s .52
** $p < .01$ with s .61

The most important result for this study was that analysis of the data revealed a very strong ($p. < .01$) correlation between the ZDaF and the OPI, supporting the finding of the previous study by Lalande and Schweckendiek. It is interesting to note that the correlation coefficient of .83 obtained in this investigation is considerably higher than the .63 earlier reported.

Evidence was also found of very strong ($p. < .01$) correlation between the

OPI and the composite of the oral portions of the ZDaF (.86) and between the OPI and the composite of the written portions of the ZDaF (.71). Examination of the relationships between the OPI and individual components of the ZDaF revealed very high ($p. < .01$) correlations in every case with the exception of the ZDaF's pronunciation component (.55), where data suggested a moderately strong ($p. < .05$) correlation. The strongest correlations were observed between the OPI and students' theme-based conversation (.88), competency in grammar and vocabulary (.78), and listening skills (.78) on the ZDaF. The correlation values obtained in these categories were considerably higher than those determined in the prior study, most notably in listening, where the earlier finding demonstrated significance at the five percent level rather than the one percent level found here. Other differences with the Lalande/Schweckendiek study were the findings of a stronger correlation between the OPI and writing (.69) and a much stronger correlation between the OPI and reading (.65) on the ZDaF.

Looking at the separate components of the ZDaF, all components appear to have very strong ($p. <.01$) correlation with ZDaF totals, with the highest correlation coefficients being obtained for the vocabulary/grammar section and the composite writing score, .93 and .94 respectively. The data also yield extremely high correlation coefficients for the reading (.88), listening (.86), and thematic conversation (.86) components. In terms of providing evidence of the reliability of the ZDaF, these results were comparable to those obtained by Lalande and Schweckendiek.

Individual components of the ZDaF also appeared to correlate highly with each other in the majority of cases. This study found much higher correlations than those reported earlier between reading and grammar/

vocabulary (.82), reading and writing (.69), listening and writing (.73), and listening and thematic conversation (.67), all of these values being significant at the one percent level. However, this study did not obtain a similar finding of significant reliability between writing and speaking in everyday situations (.48).

Discussion of Findings

The most important finding of this study is the very high correlation between the OPI and the ZDaF total score. These results suggest that most students who attain an OPI rating of Intermediate Mid or better will pass the ZDaF examination, with those obtaining an Advanced or Advanced Plus OPI rating likely to do very well on the ZDaF. Students who receive Intermediate Low OPI ratings have a low expectation of passing the ZDaF test. In examining Table 1, one will readily notice that five students in our sample failed the ZDaF, and two of them had been rated Intermediate Mid on the OPI. The following explanatory comments are in order with regard to those students. Students 12 and 14 did not attain the minimum score on the speaking component of the ZDaF and received Intermediate Low OPI ratings. Students 15 and 16 performed acceptably on the ZDaF speaking component but failed the written portion. Student 16 did not understand the directions for the letter writing exercise and received a zero for that section, thus failing the writing component. Since both students 15 and 16 had passing scores on the oral portion of the ZDaF their Intermediate Mid ratings on the OPI are not out of line.

This study obtained a stronger correlation between the OPI and the listening comprehension component of the ZDaF than the Lalande and Schweckendiek study had found and, therefore, permits greater confidence that

the OPI properly reflects the interdependence of listening and speaking than those authors believed to be the case. However, this conclusion would need to be born out by further study involving larger samples.

The results of this investigation do corroborate the earlier finding of a very high correlation between the OPI and ZDaF's grammar/vocabulary component. This result helps to answer certain criticisms of the OPI by providing additional evidence that the OPI does appropriately take into account the interweaving of function, content, and accuracy in the evaluative process.

It is more than likely that an FL department will choose to use the OPI or the ZDaF but not both. Therefore, the high correlation found between the two instruments in this and the earlier study will be information of value in making such a choice. Before making the determination, however, the department will want to consider the advantages and disadvantages of each test.

ZDaF: Advantages

The ZDaF tests listening, reading, writing, and vocabulary/structure as separate components in addition to speaking. Currently it is the most extensively used proficiency test available for this purpose. Since it is generally assumed that students progress in receptive skills (listening and reading) more rapidly than in productive skills (speaking and writing), it is advantageous to have a measure of listening and reading proficiency. The table of test results shows that most students did indeed score proportionally higher in these areas and thus the ZDaF provides students with concrete evidence of progress in language learning.

Practice tests are available from the Goethe Institute and the reading,

listening, and structure/vocabulary sections can be administered and corrected with no special training. The results then give at least some measure of proficiency and can also serve diagnostic purposes, enabling better planning of curriculum according to the students' strengths and weaknesses.

Students who pass the test receive the Zertifikat Deutsch als Fremdsprache, which is recognized as proof of intermediate-level language proficiency. This can be included on resumes and is a valuable credential for students seeking employment in a field where knowledge of German is an asset. Within a university environment, earning the Zertifikat can be motivational, since students may elect to continue course work in German in order to earn the Zertifikat. Finally, the cost of the test is minimal.

ZDaF: Disadvantages

The ZDaF examination must be taken at a Goethe Institute or college or university which has been approved as a testing center by the Goethe Institute. This means that access to the test can be limited by geographical distance from a test center. The Goethe Institute recommends that the oral interviews be held on the day following the written sections of the test, which poses a further problem if students have to travel a significant distance to a test center and incur added expense for housing and food.

Rephrasing or explaining situations in both the writing section of the test and the oral interview is proscribed, since the ZDaF requires mastery of certain vocabulary and familiarity with aspects of everyday life in Germany. While in a real-life situation some clarification would certainly be supplied, a student who misunderstands some vocabulary/situation may be severely penalized in the grading of the test, as was the case with the student in our

group who misunderstood the directions for the letter-writing exercise. Often, too, students are overly apprehensive about the rigor of the examination and less than enthusiastic about the notion of a proficiency test.

In general, the ZDaF has several positive features which make this test appropriate for measuring intermediate-level language proficiency. Instructors must have flexibility in choice of course materials and planning in order to prepare the students for the examination. From our experience with the revised ZDaF, we recommend that the test be given to students who are in their third year of German at the university level or the equivalent, unless the student has had the opportunity to live or study in a German-speaking country.

The Oral Proficiency Interview: Advantages

The most obvious advantage of the OPI is that it recognizes levels of proficiency in individuals who are over- or underprepared for the ZDaF. At the Novice level, the OPI recognizes second language proficiency that relies mostly on memorized materials, e.g., very basic vocabulary or material from situational dialogues. Performance at the Novice level is typically attained by students who have been learning a language for less than two years and, thus, would most likely not pass the ZDaF.

At the opposite end of the measurement spectrum, the OPI also challenges students who are overqualified to take the ZDaF in that it evaluates language proficiency at the Advanced level, and above. The Mittelstufenprüfung is an alternative to the ZDaF that would probably be of interest to students with Intermediate High, Advanced, or Advanced Plus OPI ratings.

Where the OPI has been properly administered, the student will come away

from the test, no matter what rating has been attained, with a sense of accomplishment. A skilled tester tries to draw out from the student how much she/he knows in a given context and has the flexibility to change to topics in which the student can produce appropriate responses. Also, the OPI's seemingly real-life, informal conversational format between the tester and the person being examined reduces test anxiety.

The Oral Proficiency Interview: Disadvantages

There is a logistical disadvantage to the OPI in that a tester should not test his/her own students. However, it is a rarity on the college level (and, presumably, on the secondary level) that two testers certified in the same language will be available to conduct interviews, then rate them and review each others ratings.

The time commitment is considerable for scheduling and conducting interviews. Also, rating the interviews can take up to two hours per interview per rater, depending on the rater's experience. Occasionally, especially with new raters, the interview yields an unratable speech sample and must be administered a second time.

Another disadvantage of the OPI is that the proficiency levels are still being refined, defined, and debated. What exactly does it mean, for example, to say that a person can, "generally be understood by sympathetic interlocutors," as the Intermediate level of performance is described in ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines?[10]

OPI costs must also be considered a factor militating against its more widespread use. To obtain an official ACTFL/ETS OPI rating costs $80.00 and is beyond the means of most FL departments or their students. The tester

certification process requires participation in a four-day workshop and six-month follow-up training with tuition of $600.

Whether students are tested with the ZDaF or the OPI, proficiency testing should have a place in the curriculum wherever possible. The more informed we are concerning what our students are learning, the better we are able to enhance their learning opportunities.

Notes

1. John L.D. Clark, "Theoretical and Technical Considerations in Oral Proficiency Testing," in Testing Language Proficiency, ed. Randall L. Jones and Bernard Spolsky (Arlington, VA: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1975), p. 10.

2. For an overview of current issues and bibliography in proficiency testing, see Heidi Byrnes, "Second Language Acquisition: Insights from a Proficiency Orientation," in Defining and Developing Proficiency: Guidelines, Implementations, and Concepts, ed. Heidi Byrnes and Michael Canale (Lincolnwood, IL.: National Textbook Co., 1987), pp. 107-131. The previous comparison of the OPI and ZDaF by John F. Lalande and Jürgen Schweckendiek appeared in UP, 17 (1986), 16-26.

3. This is the goal of the ZDaF examination, as stated in the information leaflet on the test provided by the Goethe Institute. See also Das Zertifikat Deutsch als Fremdsprache, published by the Deutscher Volkshochschulverband and the Goethe Institut München, 3rd ed., 1985, pp. 10-11. The volume is available from the Goethe Institute libraries.

4. Das Zertifikat Deutsch als Fremdsprache contains a sample test, the basic vocabulary and list of syntactic structures, as well as a complete description of criteria for correcting the test. The Themenbereiche for the test: "Arbeitswelt, Behörden, Institutionen, Rechtswesen, Bildungswesen, Freizeit und Unterhaltung, Gesundheitsfürsorge und Krankenversorgung, Information und öffentliche Medien, Lebenshaltung (Nährung, Kleidung, Wohnung, Hygiene), Mensch und Umwelt, Politik, Gesellschaft, Reise und Verkehr," p. 124.
This volume does not contain any information on the standardization, reliability, or validity of the ZDaF.

5. Das Zertifikat Deutsch als Fremdsprache, pp. 42, 64-65.

6. Alice Omaggio, Teaching Language in Context (Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1986), pp. 10-19.

7. Johannes Vazulik was certified by ACTFL as on oral proficiency tester in 1986 and since that time has conducted and rated many interviews at North Dakota State University. He is also responsible for administering OPI testing to all international graduate teaching assistants at NDSU. Cheri Brown has completed an ACTFL training workshop on the OPI and has administered the ZDaF examination annually since 1982.

8. ACTFL Oral Proficiency training Workshop, Portland, OR, 1988.

9. J.W. Connover, Practical Nonparametric Statistics, 2 ed. (John Wiley and Sons, 1980), pp. 68-101.

10. David Barnwell, "Proficiency and the Native Speaker," and Kenneth Chastain, "The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines: A Selected Sample of Opinions," ADFL Bulletin, 20 (1989), 42-46, 47-51.